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The Unwanted Land. Hedendaagse installatiekunst als plek van verplaatsing / The Unwanted Land. Contemporary installation art as a location for relocation

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***The Unwanted Land.* Contemporary installation art as a location for relocation**

Kitty Zijlmans

‘Art opens up the universe a little bit more’

Salman Rushdie, 1st Leiden Freedom Lecture,
18 June 2010

The idea for *The Unwanted Land* was born in a museum in Ireland, on a site that evoked associations with a ship on its way to an undetermined destination. What would it be like to organise an exhibition that would enable us to see and feel what it is like to be underway? On the way to where? What happens if you don't know the exact destination, if you are taken as a child to a new country, far away, with another language and other customs? Such an experience lodges itself deep inside you and gives you a different perspective on the world. *The Unwanted Land* hints at this experience. In the current globalised world, many people live a nomadic existence, whether they want to or not. Many people have settled elsewhere because living conditions are better there. Whatever the reasons for migration, it is a radical event. The things we are familiar with no longer apply. Does your new country want you? And do you want it? The project *The Unwanted Land* deals with precisely these questions. It is a challenge to present a theme such as the experience of migration – with its dual aspects of being uprooted and re-settled – in a lively way in an exhibition. Notions of place and displacement, restriction and freedom, and the insight that flows from these notions that cultural identity is something that constantly changes, are issues that are not best dealt with in a static presentation. This is why we have opted for an interactive and dynamic exhibition environment. How we arrived at this set-up is described below.

From form to place and interactivity

What is such an ‘environment’? The term became fashionable in the late 1960s and early 1970s when artists made increasing use of space in their works and employed a range of unconventional materials (from coal and fat to rags and human hair) and new media such as photography, video, projections and later the computer. They created environments in which image, sound, smell and touch played a role, increasingly in combination with technology. The American Minimalist artist Carl Andre once described the development within sculpture in the 1970s as a shift from form via structure to place. A move away from the individual object, via an analysis of the object's structure, towards a sculptural, spatial environment which defines a site, such as his own *Floor Pieces*: ‘rugs’ composed of thin tiles of lead, copper, zinc or other metals. Rosalind Krauss analysed this development further in her seminal essay ‘Sculpture in the Expanded Field’ (1979) by situating sculpture in a relational field with architecture and landscape, and positioning this development in sculpture as a spatial constellation. Since the 1980s this art form has taken enormous strides in

environmental and (multimedia) installation art. Installation art has been one of the most popular art forms in recent decades. Its most important characteristics are that it is three-dimensional, temporary, multimedia and encourages the viewer to adopt a specific, active relationship to the work.

In *The Unwanted Land*, this concept has been developed further to create an interactive complex of different multimedia installations that together form a single integrated and growing environment. As such, the exhibition will not be complete when it opens, but will change during the course of the project as the artists add and alter things and the public makes its own contribution. The public therefore has an active and co-creative role (see Dineke Huizenga's contribution to this publication). The form is closely connected to recent developments in exhibition practice that the freelance curator and critic Simon Sheikh has called 'project exhibitions'. Unlike the conventional form of group exhibition over recent decades, in which the curator usually has a decisive authorial role and the works are selected on the basis of a particular theme, geographical location or generation of artists, the 'project exhibition' views the exhibition itself as the medium for broaching a particular issue and takes on an essay-like form. This means that, like an essay, the exhibition attempts to present a convincing view of contemporary phenomena or developments. The exhibition is therefore not a display of existing art works, but a means of addressing the public. In this model, the public is viewed not as a monolithic entity – as a single person – but as a diverse collection of groups or individuals. Not visitors, therefore, who just happen to show up, but active participants in the game. The exhibition and the public together form an ecosystem with the museum serving as the site where art is produced. In essence, the history of Museum Beelden aan Zee reflects precisely this development in that it not only presents various forms of sculpture within a historical context, but has also increasingly adopted this latter form. The exhibition itself is the work of art, which addresses an underlying theme and in which there is no clear distinction between the various art works or installations, which flow into and respond to each other.

The Unwanted Land can therefore be characterised as a 'project exhibition', focussing not on the individual artists but on their interplay and interaction. There is no single curator steering the project: the six artists – Tiong Ang, David Bade, Dirk de Bruyn, Sonja van Kerkhoff, Renée Ridgway and Rudi Struik – share the curatorship. This does not mean that the decisions within the exhibition are arbitrary. Quite the contrary, the artists have entered into a long-term exchange of ideas about the exhibition's form, content and aims prior to its realisation. The artists have been invited to approach the exhibition as a collaborative process, but also as individuals. Little by little, this form of presentation has created 'communities', including the artists themselves in dialogue with various groups of visitors. The exhibition – if that word still does it justice – thus becomes the medium for communication about a particular subject, in this case migration.

On the move

Migration is certainly not a recent phenomenon. Our species once began a long journey on foot from Africa and within tens of thousands of years had spread across the entire globe. But these colonies did not remain static; mankind has continued to roam the earth, in small or large groups, out of necessity or choice. The *Atlas of World Art* (2004), edited by the English art historian John Onians, provides a dizzying overview of the migrations between various regions and continents that began approximately 40,000 years ago as groups of people journeyed to new destinations along the coasts, via rivers and over land. The jumbled lines of expansion, quests, conquests, explorations, trade contacts and exchanges, and the resulting interculturalisation over thousands of years, resemble a

plate of spaghetti. And all of this was driven by curiosity, acquisitiveness or coercion. The atlas examines visual art as a universal human phenomenon, showing how it unites us, but it also demonstrates art's great variety and the hybridity that has resulted from all these (un)wanted contacts. It is in zones of contact that we find the greatest dynamism, which can have positive results: change and exchange bring challenges that would not otherwise have existed, as the stories in this publication testify. Migration often results in a heightened consciousness of existence, which is what the artists in *The Unwanted Land* interpret.

The six artists are linked by their experience of migration from or to the Netherlands, some because their parents emigrated and, as children, they had no option but to accompany them (Dirk de Bruyn, Rudi Struik and Tiong Ang); others because they heard the call of the Netherlands, the country of their ancestors (Renée Ridgway and Sonja van Kerkhoff). One has returned to his birthplace (David Bade). They were asked to participate by Rudi Struik – who had the initial idea for the project – based upon personal encounters and their individual stories. Each of them has a highly personal and intense artistic practice and a unique formal language. They work in a range of media (drawing, painting, sculpture, video, film and performance) and make installations. Sometimes travel/migration is an implicit or even explicit point of departure for their work. In *The Unwanted Land* this takes a variety of forms: a travel diary, a track that the visitor must literally traverse, or a discussion of the influence of migration on one's personal history. The core of the environment is a scaffolding structure. On, beneath and around this structure are a variety of installations that deal with awareness of the impact of migration: in a highly personal account concealed in the limited space of a suitcase (Dirk de Bruyn), in the form of a training circuit (David Bade), a mobile film set in which the visitors perform as extras (Tiong Ang), a kind of shuffleboard in the form of a hand with a choice of five destinations (Rudi Struik), an Ayurvedic treatment room for processing Dutch colonial history (Renée Ridgway), and a vehicle for migration based on the Māori saying 'My home is not a home that stands still. It is a home that moves' (Sonja van Kerkhoff).

Small migrations

It is important to continue to reassess the subject of migration and globalisation. This need is prompted in part by a continuing uncertainty that large groups of people in the Netherlands (and elsewhere) feel about their role in society. *The Unwanted Land* arises from the need – from an artistic viewpoint – to explore a (re)new(ed) perspective that will enable the discussion about our culturally diverse society to enter a new phase. Migration is something that many people share. It has formed numerous individuals and helped to shape our contemporary society. Migration takes a variety of forms: in addition to the forced migration resulting from racism, war, famine and other disasters, there is also what we have dubbed the 'small migration' to describe the experiences of those people who, in search of a better life, decided to try their luck in another country, such as the many Dutch people who emigrated to Canada, Australia and New Zealand after the Second World War. The children of these migrants form a specific group within this spectrum. They were taken along, not knowing what lay before them. The reasons for migration – whether out of desire, necessity or choice – are often tangled and form a complex issue, as Marlou Schrover makes clear in her contribution to this publication.

In this project, migration is not interpreted as a metaphor for figurative relocation but indicates actual, historical and geographical relocation as Sara Ahmed from Goldsmiths (University of London) discusses in her essay 'Home and Away. Narratives of Migration and Estrangement'. Neither is migration simply a matter of travel, after which you return home, but means: relocating one's

'home'. Ahmed raises the important question as to what 'home' means: where you were born, where you grew up, where you live, where your family lives? Do we have only one home? Or more? She also makes the point that migration does not necessarily mean a movement away from 'home' because there is also alienation and movement within one's 'home'. After all, home is a place of encounters between those who remain and those who arrive and depart. Feeling at home – the word says it all – is largely an affective issue. It derives principally from a feeling of belonging – of lived experience – which is felt in both body and mind.

What the body remembers

People who migrate carry the traces of their displacement with them. The body too 'remembers' things. Tastes and smells in particular can stimulate memory: Proust's description of how the crumbs of a madeleine soaked in lime-blossom tea bring childhood memories flooding back to the surface of his consciousness is well known. As obvious as it might sound, it is the body that travels and so Sara Ahmed asks herself 'how do bodies re-inhabit space'. New bodies arrive and share the space with others. The experience of migration is therefore not only spiritual or psychological, but also physical.

Principal among those who have stressed the importance of physical experience was the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose phenomenology anchored consciousness in the body. Phenomenology's point of departure is the direct and intuitive experience of things, and for Merleau-Ponty people are linked to the world and to each other as 'body-subjects'. For him, there is no such thing as we (people) on the one hand and the object on the other; the body is a medium of exchange between the 'self' and the 'other'. Merleau-Ponty therefore places great stress on the physicality of perception. In the authentic experience, body and mind are inextricably interwoven. In his contribution to this publication, Dirk de Bruyn writes about the pain of a body that is torn from its familiar environment and how that remains inscribed on the body. These emotions will not be experienced as strongly or painfully by all, but they are always deeply embedded. The installation-environment *The Unwanted Land* aims to address this body-subject. The visitor will not only be set in motion, but will be asked to forge a relationship with the world, effected by his or her direct encounter with what takes place in the constructed environment. This openness is essential in order to undergo an authentic, direct experience. Observation is an activity that must be acknowledged and which involves the entire body. This presupposes a subject that is conscious of this activity. It concerns the identification of the essence of phenomena – in this case the meaning of relocation, attachment and alienation – and for this the body, the consciousness of an embodied experience, is of importance.

After a quick sprint around David Bade's track, a mediation in Renée Ridgway's therapy rooms, a trip with Sonja van Kerkhoff, being immersed in Dirk de Bruyn's sound and video installation (dictated by what could fit in a suitcase), listening to Rudi Struik's whispering recordings and performing in Tiong Ang's film set, the visitor will certainly be conscious of his or her body, and memories and experiences will be evoked. The visitors carry out the installations, as it were. They are stimulated to activity, even if in some cases that means surrendering themselves to rest and contemplation. The stories generated by *The Unwanted Land* – in experiences, in writing or told to one another at the story table – are as variegated as a patchwork quilt, but each patch adjoins another on each side.

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